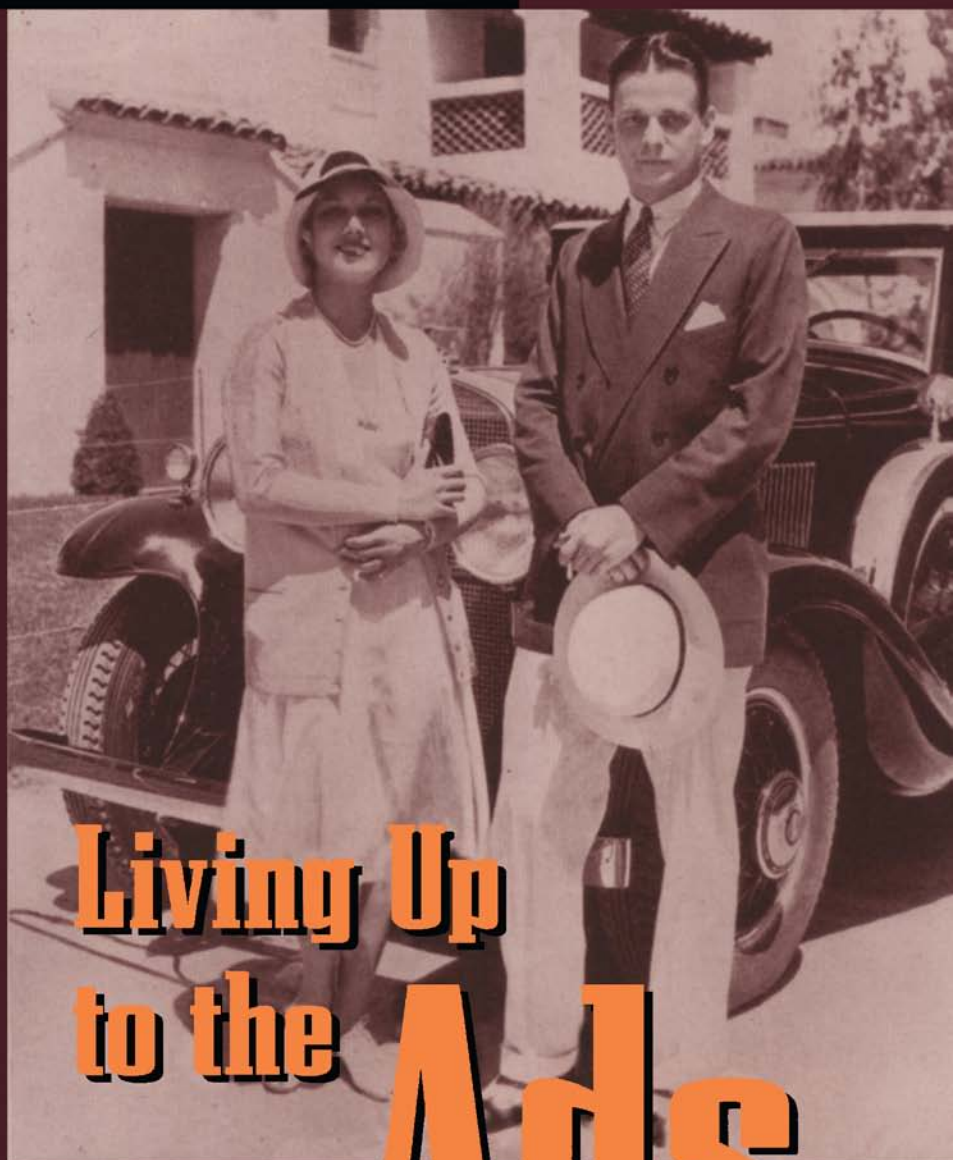


Simone Weil Davis



Living Up  
to the  
**Ads**

*Gender Fictions of the 1920s*

## Living Up to the Ads

New Americanists A Series Edited by Donald E. Pease

# **Living Up to the Ads**

Gender Fictions of the 1920s

**Simone Weil Davis**

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*For my parents*





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## Introduction

Does advertising “work”? Do ads actually determine consumer decisions and choices? Maybe advertisers and their critics both overstate the powers of suggestion. How preposterous to think that we would be fooled, agog over an ad that wears its agenda on its screaming neon sleeve. As consumers, we all feel like well-versed readers, sophisticates—while we may guffaw or sigh over a well-crafted ad (or an especially bad one), we readily discern the manipulative ploys of advertisements, and when we decide what to buy, we would like to think that we rely more on word of mouth and personal experience than hypnotic commercial command. This point has certainly been made.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the thing is this, though: Ads *do* “work,” but their primary function is not to lead a consumer to choose between brands. Rather, through inundation, ads serve to produce an all-around ambiance that encourages consumerism in toto, making it seem as desirable and natural as air.<sup>2</sup> Advertiser Christine Frederick noted in a 1929 manual: “I always think of advertising as a tremendous moving-picture device to keep ever and constantly changing before us, in film after film, reel after reel, all the good things that manufacturers make everywhere, set in a dramatic scenario which compels attention through the touch of advertising genius.”<sup>3</sup> In the seventy years of technological innovation and marketing consolidation since Frederick’s comment, advertising has become an ever more influential part of a hegemonic matrix of social and economic institutions. We do indeed attend its panorama and, whether slack-jawed or skeptical, are gripped by all these “good things . . . set in a dramatic scenario.”

At first it was just a byproduct; then, it became a stated goal of the commercial endeavor. To practitioners, it was implicit that the advertising industry should help shape popular notions of identity—and by extension, gender, race, and class. Jackson Lears remarks that “national advertisers . . . participated in the construction of the modern subject—a normative self that suited the emerging corporate structure of power relations in the early-twentieth-century United States.”<sup>4</sup> *Living Up to the Ads* examines both fictional and commercial representations of identity from the 1920s, the decade that secured a place for advertising at the heart of American business. Considering fiction by Sinclair

Lewis, Bruce Barton, Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nella Larsen, along with advertisements and other data emerging from the advertising industry (such as memoirs, manuals, meeting minutes, and newsletters), this book determines what sort of gendered subjectivities were, in fact, under construction.

### Advertising Selves

By the twenties, the prizing of sincerity and self-reliance characteristic of nineteenth-century advice literature had given way, in writing pitched toward the urban and suburban classes of the United States, to the endorsement of a more theatrical, even salesmanlike selfhood. From *The Great Gatsby* to adman Bruce Barton's portrait of Jesus, *The Man Nobody Knows*, popular books of the period lauded and lamented the effects of this "selling self." This shift, so linked to the emergence of a commodity culture, was part of a complex of changes. As advertising became an increasingly established component of business as usual, not one but three new *metaphors for personhood* were introduced into the popular arena, means of structuring one's thoughts about identity that were compelling, gendered, and suggested by the commercial transaction. These subject positions—the adman, the consumer, and the "vehicle" or advertising model who transmits the message between them—were both evocative and omnipresent enough that they began to circulate culturally as gendered and raced tropes for identity itself.

As the corporate world became the United States's designated new epic sphere, popular and commercial narratives increasingly located masculine selfhood in the persuasive impact one had on others, rather than in the monadic integrity of self-reliance. The *adman* (so denominated despite the presence of some women in the field) borrows "influence" from the domain of the feminine to create a new machismo of persuasion. Racial exclusions that kept nonwhites almost entirely out of this sphere and often stigmatized Jewish advertisers by characterizing them as the definitive hucksters meant that the persuading salesman with the winning personality was envisioned in his WASP whiteness—regardless of the race or ethnicity of the readership of these narratives.<sup>6</sup>

The *consumer*, then and still conceived primarily as female, is supposed to manifest her "rainbow moods" most entirely via the selection and purchase of commodities, the expressive lexicon from which she is to assemble and display her identity.<sup>7</sup> Cast by the industry as the ultimate object of scrutiny, the consumer must be read, interpreted, "mimicked" (even by female copywriters),

and seduced. But she, too, advertises, as she performs the spectacle of her gender. Here, the portrayed generic consumer modeled a certain kind of classed whiteness, which was ultimately depicted as inherent to American feminine consumption—in part, because national advertisers did not yet have faith in the buying power of nonwhite niche markets, and consequently, often left them unaddressed in commercial narratives.<sup>8</sup>

The *vehicle*, or the female advertising model pitching and posing with the product, works to convey the message between the adman and consumer. She functions as a metaphor, her own commodified but canny presence representing and augmenting the appeal of the commodity with which she poses. The representational work performed by an advertising model, who uses her charm to bolster the allure of something *else*, seems a telling distillation of the work of the objectified female, generally, in American commodity culture.

All three of these gendered identities were picked up, remodeled, exploited, and explored as figures for selfhood by fiction writers and other American consumer-participants. Whether for the “selling self,” the consuming female, or the posing vehicle, the task of self-presentation seems to come hand in glove with a shame and anxiety about the self that is being hauled on stage. Despite the supposedly diametric opposition between the knowing salesman and the “sucker” who succumbs to his address, despite the hierarchical and classed distinction between entrepreneurial magnate P. T. Barnum and the comely hired “attraction” featured on his poster, all these marketized subject positions are shaped by the pressure to make an impact on others and, thereby, turn a “profit.”

One 1920 ad for nail polish, designed to invoke the urgent physical anxiety so often incited by advertising, gave readers the choice between “Embarrassed Fingers That Shrink from Scrutiny or Charming Fingers That Seek the Light!”<sup>9</sup> Animated with the melodramatic emotional agency of little people, the digits in this copy must negotiate between the antipodes of shame and self-display. This same axis determines the orbit of the models for subjectivity discussed in this work. The need to self-present, or “seek the light,” is paradoxically bound to the equally pressing need to “shrink from scrutiny,” to hide those flaws, hungers, doubts, and ambivalences that might bring into question one’s commitment to self-spectacle and the profit motive. Invested with the heightened attention given to that which must be hidden, these “shameful” qualities, partly because they are regretted, often become the secret locus of personal identification.



Emerging from the architecture of the commercial transaction, these subject positions became, for the American public(s), not only available but almost unavoidable. As Judith Butler writes, “the *conditions of intelligibility* are themselves formulated in and by power, and this normative exercise of power is rarely acknowledged as an operation of power at all.”<sup>10</sup> Self-promotion, consumption, assemblage, and display—these became the means whereby many people organized their thinking about selfhood, gender, and the fashioning and expression of an identity. The deep gendering of these positions in the commercial *mise-en-scène* worked to underscore and retain the power imbalance between them, by making it seem to be a “natural” story of the difference between men and women.

The models for subjectivity generated by the nationalized commercial endeavor also performed racial work, helping to universalize and even celebritize an implicit middle-class whiteness in the presumed audience, what Michael Uebel calls “‘autonomy effects’—the ways in which [whiteness] appears as a generality.”<sup>11</sup> The ascendancy of commercial culture made these effects more pronounced through the content of the ads themselves—where every “you” addressed was assumed to be white, and nonwhite figures were almost invariably servants. Additionally, national brands and nationwide advertising meant the curtailment or partial suppression of an array of localized commercial practices that were far more expressive of diverse ethnic, class, and racial positions—from the mom-and-pop market to the truck-bed performances of the patent medicine salesman and the hand-painted sign hoisted outside the neighborhood beauty salon. To an extent, then, this commercial project is blanketed by an artificially universal, imposed whiteness, experienced by many Americans of color, as we will see, as either displacement or insult. Yet in order to explore the workings of power in the commercial arena, I emphasize the realm of gender relations (also inherently racialized), in part because gender was so explicitly, indeed obsessively addressed.

Because of advertising’s sheer ubiquity and invocation of extremely personal concerns, the provision of models for self-fashioning is probably the most important aspect of its influential power—far more significant in terms of the cultural changes wrought than are the explicit directives of individual advertisements. In 1929, historian and industry advocate Frank Presbrey enthused that advertising had encouraged the “growth of a national homogeneity in our people, a uniformity of ideas which, despite the mixture of races, is found to be greater here than in European countries [which would] . . . seem to be easier

to nationalize.”<sup>12</sup> He saw this capacity to consolidate and mold public desires, especially in light of American diversities, as key to advertising’s success as a nationalizing social force, what he called a “civilizer” (613).

The means whereby this “homogeneity” was (incompletely) fostered were multiple. First, as the complex of institutions that make up market capitalism gained more social and economic power, advertising really became a presence, indeed a condition, of American culture, media, business, and even the landscape. The sheer amount of time that people spent selling, advertising, and buying—especially living as they were within a landscape awash with “consuming images”<sup>13</sup>—had a massive impact on the American identity, as a verb will invariably shape its subject.

At least in theory, those new tools for self-fashioning, promulgated in part by the advertising industry, were more porous and geared less toward autonomy and self-regulation than the models for identity construction circulating in the United States of the nineteenth century. With immigration and internal migration at an all-time high, with the rapid-fire insurgence of new economic forms, urban centers, technologies, and relations to work fostered by factory labor and corporatization, a vacuum was created that could not be filled by the last century’s models for subjectivity and gender. Or so the story goes. Perhaps this vacuum, this “clean break” disjuncture between nineteenth- and twentieth-century “ways of being,” was mainly a construction generated and cherished by a modernity born out of self-mythologization, and fired in the kiln of the First World War. At any rate, new ways of thinking about and enacting selfhood were simultaneously being forged and snatched up by people who often were negotiating environments for which they felt unprepared, people engaged in increasingly industrialized or corporatized work relations as well as ever more commercialized contexts for interaction.<sup>14</sup>

As has been theorized by Jackson Lears and others, during the early twentieth century, people living in the United States became more likely to think of their identity as rooted in their consumer and leisure practices than in their role as producers. Though the advertising industry has always proffered images of work and the workplace, it increasingly positioned selfhood as resident among an individual’s leisure pursuits. To some extent, this shift forestalled the unsettling conclusions that an alienated workforce might otherwise have been likely to reach. Efficiency experts like Frederick Winslow Taylor and of course Henry Ford, by discouraging worker solidarity and encouraging a mechanistic approach to labor, “pushed” identity cathexis out of the workplace; the “pull” was

provided by commodities, which with the help of energetic and creative advertisers and improved avenues of distribution promised an easily accessorized leisure self outside the forty (or sixty) hours. Although consumerism obfuscated the role of work, it also transformed it, since “work,” too, is a fluid category only discernible as one element in the complex of relations that determines its nature.<sup>15</sup> One goal of the present study is to locate and articulate some of the psychological work performed on and off the job, often covertly and under some duress, by subjects seeking social intelligibility in the context of commodity culture.

Advertisers contributed consciously to popular discourse about selfhood in several ways. They generated many of the period’s success manuals, thereby helping to weave together a modern portrait of masculine achievement and authority, and they also delved energetically into the study of commercial psychology, making the female consumer the predominant subject of their interpretation. In their manuals and memoirs, advertisers zealously theorized the secrets of salesmanship and the psychological workings of the female shopper—although these “secrets” were never particularly shrouded by the veil of professional discretion. In fact, advertising’s celebration of its own capacity to persuade and its purchase on the audience psyche is less a buried subtext of the commercial enterprise than an omnipresent metanarrative. Industry analysis of its craft and target blurred into industry promotion. As a result of this very public investigation, advertising’s interpretation of psychology and its contribution to it were absolutely central in shaping popular notions, about both the burgeoning field of psychology and the human psyche itself.

To understand the social impact of this industry on gendered subjectivity, one must also consider the ads themselves, and more specifically, their role in determining the nature of modern objectification of women. As Karl Marx famously depicted it, with the emergence of commodification, the object itself took on a new fetishized power, exalted and animated by its nimbus of exchange value.<sup>16</sup> The crucial, enabling links between this “vivification” of the commodity object and the objectification of the woman whose image is used to sell is a special focus of this book. The centuries-old symbolic function played by women in both religious allegory and secular national imagery surely predetermined that this function would continue to manifest itself in the face of a commodity culture. The female in an ad lends all her desirability and animation to the product; at the same time, the totemic grandeur of the commodity icon, and its fixity, are projected on the “thingified” woman. The woman thus

objectified is engaged in representational labor, a set of performative tasks that proves both pleasurable and burdensome.

The figure of the confidence man, close cousin to the adman, has been well theorized, as has that of the female consumer.<sup>17</sup> By discussing the advertiser and consumer together, alongside the “vehicle” who transmits the message between them, this book questions the causative—and often destabilizing—set of relations out of which these figures spring. Gendered distinctions between the advertiser and the shopper that “he” addresses, between the manipulator of human drives and the female vehicle who works to provoke them, seem to fade away in the face of the tension between zealous self-promotion and mortified self-disguise with which all these figures must cope.

Some of the similarities between consumption and production are inherent to marketplace relations, and yet they have often gone untheorized: to maintain the hierarchy between producer and consumer, it is necessary that these parallels be obscured. The gendering of that divide—in which producers are envisioned as male, consumers as female—has been central to maintaining this hierarchy. Both critics and proponents of commodity culture have emphasized the differences between a male-coded production ethos supposedly based in rationality and industry, and a feminized consumerism ostensibly driven by desire. By contrast, *Living Up to the Ads* considers the phenomenological links between them.

Look in any library index under the key words *consumer behavior*, and after scanning twenty titles or more, you will gather that consumers must “behave” far more than producers appear to. Why does behaving—such a vulnerable, unwilling verb—seem the special provenance of the consumer? What makes the drives that lead producers to “behave” fall out of view? Like Michel Foucault’s eagle-eyed disciplinarians snugly shielded in their Benthamite panopticon, or the Wizard of Oz working his levers behind a drawn curtain, the generators of our commercial economy have created a system that will allow them to supersede surveillance, at least in their capacity as producers. Let me write my way into the heart of that taboo. Roots that predate, and consequently inform, both industrial and finance capitalism, reveal the connections between consumer and producer “behavior.”

### Systemic Shame

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber posits a causal link between Protestant worldly asceticism and economic rationalism.<sup>18</sup> This

rationalism, Weber argues, sanctifies and organizes the profit motive by defining it as devolving from a Puritan valuation of industry. This logic creates a “psychological incentive,” even a “categorical imperative,” for capitalist production as a proof of one’s salvation, he asserts (146 n. 1, 160 n.5). Weber’s groundbreaking text does not address the relationship between Protestant psychology and capitalist consumption, however, except contrarily: he depicts Puritan “anti-Mammonism” as a force that militated against the development of a consumerist psychology.

As an aside, paralleling Weber’s project in the *Protestant Ethic*, Werner Sombart attempted in 1911 to consider capitalism’s philosophical linkage to Judaism. *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* is a complex, flawed work<sup>19</sup>—like Weber’s, very much addressing the conceptualizations of its day, whereby the “spirit” of a people could be codified. Though Sombart later aligned himself with Nazism, his work was initially lauded *and* reviled by Jewish and gentile readers, including anti-Semites. Sombart somewhat tentatively cites Jews as the earliest advertisers, remarking, “The ‘deafening invitation’ . . . which came from the small [eighteenth-century Jewish clothes dealer] is now made by the million-voiced advertisements of our business life. If the Jews are to be considered the originators of the system of ‘getting hold of the customers,’ their claim to be the fathers of modern advertising is equally well established” (139). Like Weber, Sombart’s emphasis is on the rationalism (and male sexual sublimation) that he sees fueling capitalist production. Desire only factors into the economy he describes as innately Jewish when it is channeled via suppression into rational capitalism, and both consumption and women drop almost entirely from his analysis.<sup>20</sup>

To return to Weber (whose work was much more widely known in the United States of the twenties than was Sombart’s): although one must acknowledge that the Puritan lauding of thrift and the corollary distrust of luxurious display were profound components in the Protestant culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, another feature of the Protestant model for subjectivity is nonetheless much aligned with the advertising industry’s later formulations about the consumer’s identity. One should, indeed, consider the former a significant forbear to the latter. This alignment is not surprising. The split that Weber claims is so crucial to the Protestant sensibility—between the virtue of acquiring wealth and the vice associated with spending it—seems a strained, collapsible distinction: production and consumption are clearly interdependent, mutually constitutive parts of the same economic system.

Weber is not alone in arguing for this split, however—the psychologies of production and consumption are popularly conceived and presented as entirely distinct, almost mutually exclusive, requiring textual frames so segregated that their commixture seems almost forbidden.<sup>21</sup> What is it about the Protestant ethic that prepares for and fuels the spirit of consumption?

Advertising's double-valenced address of the consumer-subject reflects a two-tiered model of individuality constituted largely by a Protestant sensibility. In both the Protestant and commercial arenas, the individual is hailed simultaneously with two contradictory addresses.<sup>22</sup> The first runs as follows: "You, the individual, have direct access to the truth." Since its inception in the Reformation, Protestantism defined itself as a liberation of the individual from the supervisory mediation of the church. Ostensibly, Protestant selfhood is to be understood as constituted most supremely by this capacity for direct communion with God's truth. Advertising also takes as its founding premise the secular but significantly resonant myth that the individual's democratic liberty is most fully realized in his or her right to make selections as a consumer. For example, Paul Cherington, director of research at the J. Walter Thompson Company, said in 1922 that "consumption is no longer a thing of needs but a matter of choices freely exercised."<sup>23</sup>

Or see Christine Frederick, who describes the newfound freedom of the modern American woman primarily as the freedom to shop: "She is less sentimental, and more aggressive and sure of her tastes. She is not afraid to be an individual, and this reflects itself in desiring specialties and novelties and new patterns and new colors. She knows precisely what she wants, even in color and line" (23). This new woman's assertiveness, individuality, desire, and will are all structured around—and limited to—the task of consumption. She can garner the information she needs from the advertisements she scans and then make up her own mind about what to buy; brand diversification affords her the consummate opportunity to exert her personal agency in the world. Since John Milton's day, Protestant tenets have influenced the development of democratic principles, including those concerning individual rights, so the link between civic and spiritual "choice" here is not accidental. Though the context for advertising's claim about consumption is more political than religious, its depiction of an individuality defined above all else by its direct access to a larger truth mimics the Protestant model for selfhood. In other words, Protestantism and advertising allegedly exalt individual Christian and consumer subjects as unaided recipients of information, freed of any reliance on an intermediary.

Yet both the Protestant and commercial arenas, concurrent with the apparent exaltation of one's status as an individual, offer an unending subcurrent of incited anxiety about one's inherent odiousness (whether physical, spiritual, social, or all of the above), and insecurity about one's status as an elect or nonelect. The second address extended to Christian and consumer subjects alike is almost all subtext then, and runs like this: "You, the individual, are probably in a state of wretchedness, and what you must do is to act 'as if' and hope that you are, in fact, among the elect." Your actions will not transform you, nor will they become you. The tortured logic of simulation requires a signal disjuncture between you, the compelled strategist, and your works, the proffered evidence, because you generate works for show, for proof: they will be "the technical means, not of purchasing salvation, but of getting rid of the fear of damnation" (Weber 1976, 115). Thus, a presumed, incited, and aggravated sense of shame is the force behind the need to emulate, which Thorstein Veblen places at the heart of most consumer practices.<sup>24</sup>

The much touted power of consumer choice is undercut by this shifting of judgment away from the to-be-selected product and onto the consumer him or herself. If it doesn't do for you what it does for the character in the ad, it is due not to the product's deficiencies but your own inhering vileness. In her 1923 article, "The Snob Appeal," J. Walter Thompson's Frances Maule assumes as given that people feel horrible about themselves, and that this "inferiority complex" is our deepest motivator and the most important lesson made available by psychology.

According to these new explorers into human motives [psychoanalysts], we all suffer from an eating sense of our own unimportance. . . . When we wear the garments of the cosmopolitan great lady who "assembles, tries and admits to a place in her life only the choicest" . . . we are made to feel that [she has] "nothing on us." And this is what we all want, really, more than anything else in the world. This is the "grand and glorious feeling" which we are seeking all the time.<sup>25</sup>

As conjured by the advertising industry, the consumer's individuality is constituted by isolation—an isolation caused by his or her shying away from the scrutinizing gaze of others.<sup>26</sup> The only viable alternative to sheer retreat or public humiliation is to step behind a battery of shielding commodities that will disguise and, especially, protect one from detection. In *Captains of Con-*

*sciousness*, a study of advertising in the 1920s, Stuart Ewen remarks that “the negative condition was portrayed as social failure derived from continual public scrutiny. The positive goal emanated from one’s *modern* decision to arm himself [*sic*] against such scrutiny with the accumulated ‘benefits’ of industrial production.”<sup>27</sup>

Behind the individual agency that the invited act of consumption will supposedly manifest, then, lurks a sadder selfhood, created by the need to withdraw. As one deodorant ad from the twenties put it, the consumer requires “complete protection against even the most fleeting possibility of reproach.”<sup>28</sup> Advertisements routinely invoked an astonishing degree of personal, physical shame: “How to Keep Free from a Wretched Glisten”; “How to Prevent the Homeliness that Creeps upon You Unawares”; “He was his own worst enemy . . . oh why had he neglected the bath that morning, the shave, the change of linen?”<sup>29</sup> Roland Marchand has cataloged other examples of such ads, in which job opportunities are lost and marriage proposals rejected because of indiscretions like body odor and the “slovenliness” of ungartered socks (212–15). Whether these ads instill, aggravate, or merely reflect widespread anxieties about untamable physicality, their cumulative effect bespeaks a profound shame in the posited reader. For the audience, the sharp jolt of self-recognition, the identification, is with the blemishes or flaws that the ads heave into the limelight for exposure.

The mortifications and compensatory drives of the consumer have been suggested, teased into being, ranked, and tabulated by zip code, chakra, race, and every other distinguishing denomination. Consumer shame of all sorts, from physical embarrassment to class anxiety to the dread of alienating loved ones, is analyzed and incited by advertisers and marketers—the supposed prevalence of this individual-as-flaw model, and the resultant vulnerability of the potential consumer, are almost truisms. By contrast, the shame associated with production is heavily vaulted and disavowed. Both the fear of vulnerability and exposure, and the consumeristic model for desire and purchase as an unending loop, can be understood as indicating the phenomenology of capitalist production as well as consumption, again implying the artificiality of the hierarchical distinction drawn between the two spheres. The cyclic, infinite process whereby consumer shame leads to consumer desire, which leads to purchase followed by a resumption of doubt and shame, uncannily parallels the unending circuits through which capital races as it changes from currency



to commodity and back again. As Marx discusses the “law which gives capital no rest and continually whispers in its ear ‘Go on! Go on!’” his language evokes a remarkable compulsion and vulnerability.<sup>30</sup> In *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism*, Robert Heilbroner writes:

Capital, unlike the use values that embody prestige and power in tributary societies, exists in a constant state of vulnerability as it passes through its never-ending circuits. . . . Continuous dissolution and recapture is the essence of the process of competition. . . . Capital is powerful only insofar as it continuously runs the gauntlet of circulation. . . .

Competition . . . [means] the inescapable exposure of each capitalist to the efforts of others to gain as much as possible of the public’s purchasing power.<sup>31</sup>

“Running the gauntlet of circulation” and enduring “inescapable exposure,” the advertiser, on the frontlines of capitalist production, would seem particularly desirous of the “complete protection against even the most fleeting possibility of reproach” that she or he promises to the consumer. Weber calls up just this mobilizing force of agitation when he remarks on the producer’s need for the “complete protection” of proof: “The religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work . . . as the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of . . . the spirit of capitalism” (1976, 172). Advertisers and commentators on commercial culture typically ascribe both fear of exposure and repetitive, bottomless desire to the consumer. Extending Heilbroner and Weber’s notions implies that the phenomenology of consumerism needs to be correlated far more closely than is common practice to that of capitalist production.<sup>32</sup>

Once the consumer was determined by academic researchers to be worthy of study, “she” was found to have already been smeared on a specimen tray by market researchers, each of “her” impulses and desires defined, cataloged, and ready for scholarly dissection. By contrast, what fuels the impulse to produce and keep on producing in a capitalist economy is often either overlooked as self-evident or exalted as an almost metaphysical exemplar of the life force. Despite the proliferation of selling and business “how-tos,” the “why-dos”—the motivations behind production—remain the wagging fingers on an invisible hand.

## Reading Stories and Ads

Not only are production and consumption symbiotically inextricable, but producers of commercial narratives are consumers of them as well, influenced by the discursive pool to which they contribute. Yet how can one reasonably extrapolate from representations of gendered subjectivity to lived experience? This book is precisely about this interplay, about the relationship between people and representations. Depictions of gendered selfhood in ads and fiction both mirror and shape the popular psyche, but the processes of reflection and influence bring with them all sorts of experiences that are not embedded in the narratives themselves. For instance, to the extent that members of the audience of commercial culture attempt to simulate the stances they see adopted in advertisements, the work of simulation or approximation becomes itself the site of identification, more profoundly so than does the specific nature of that which we strive to imitate and become. By calling this practice of approximation “work” and arguing that people identify (even if only secretly and partially) with the labor of staging such simulations, I mean to highlight both the performative, productive nature of simulation and the sense of compulsion that drives such performances. Ad “work,” however, is not unmixed drudgery. Most typically, the pleasure of performance and the erotics of the commodity braid together inextricably with the anxiety incited by that same culture to motivate and fuel such stagings. But the relationship between a representation and its audience is not the only significant interplay between text and life. Given the ambivalences and agendas of cultural producers, and the impact of both on their work, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the representations of subjectivity put forth by both advertisers and novelists, and the lives of those writers themselves.

The substance, form, and site of these two distinct genres—the literary and commercial—have interpenetrated at least since the rise of modern advertising.<sup>33</sup> In the twenties, much of a writer’s income was derived from magazine stories: these literally shared the page with advertisements. Research like Ellen Gruber Garvey’s on the promotion of the bicycle illustrates that “theme” stories were sometimes commissioned to work in tandem with ads, while many ads from the twenties follow the narrative form of little stories, drawing in readers by mimicking the fiction that adjoins them on the magazine page.<sup>34</sup>

The authors discussed in this book deal consciously with selfhood in the

context of a commercial culture, and they are just as likely to borrow the discursive style of the copywriter or to reference particular advertisements and brand names as they are to depict their protagonists in the act of shopping or sales. The realism they all typically employ, whether sardonic or frank, is an engagement with the mode of the advertisement, and as we will see in chapter 5, the American surrealism experimented with by Zelda Fitzgerald in *Save Me the Waltz* also owes much to the commercial address and bourgeois cult of the commodity. Most important, they all use the metaphoric figures of advertisement, display, and consumption to develop the personae and plots they are creating.

These authors were not only “treating” the phenomenon of subjectivity and commodity culture, they were living in it, constructed by it, illustrative of it—as is the modern-day critic hoping to comment on them. Essentially, they were marketing themselves and their work to a predominantly middle-class consumer culture, addressing and simultaneously participating in it. At the same time, all the novels read at length here perform some kind of critique of this culture. Perhaps Sinclair Lewis’s satire is the most openly critical of the texts examined, but in its time, it was also a best-seller and was itself “commodified,” the term *Babbity* fast taking on the cachet of a brand name or trademark. Certainly, none of these writers positioned themselves at an emphatic remove from mainstream cultural practices. At least in terms of class standing, these authors interrogated mainstream commercial culture “from within,” and this very embeddedness links them directly to the advertisers considered in this book. The hegemony of the “center” was, of course, dubious: the Fitzgeralds were expatriates, Lewis was a radical, and Larsen addressed a specifically Black middle class. Still, none of these qualities marked them as practitioners of “fringe” or alternative cultural forms. And advertisers, in a similar irony, so often seen as producers or at least disseminators of hegemonic culture, generally understood themselves to be detached or removed from the society they addressed, and even the work in which they themselves engaged, suggesting that the core/periphery model for dominant and subcultural identification is fruitfully complicated.

Fiction itself was and is heavily advertised and promoted, and authors like the Fitzgeralds and Lewis both gained from and contended with the boons and exigencies of celebrity. Conversely, the advertising profession has always attracted artists and writers (something that the industry has often struggled to downplay), and at least two of the authors examined here were directly en-